Lessons from Language for Mainstream Lecturers

By Maria Snarski

Language awareness and development is often thought of as something that is associated only with the teachers of language. Often the case is that the language class provides the only opportunity for students to practice their "foreign" language be it English, Italian, French, etc. Occasionally, however, the language to be practised and developed is the medium of instruction for classes other than the "language" class. In other words, students are also studying other subjects (economics, mathematics, accounting, etc.) with this "foreign" language as the medium of instruction. This was the case at the Peninsula Technikon in Bellville, South Africa, where the vast majority of students were studying for their education diploma in English, although English was not their mother tongue and was more likely their third or even fourth language. This situation was problematic for two basic reasons: The students' English competency was low (there was no real proficiency level expected of the students due to an open admission policy) and, at the same time, the lecturers were continuing to teach as though their student population was versed in the language of instruction, as was the case to a larger extent during apartheid. To improve such an imbalance of the students' language skills and the lecturers' expectations of their students' skills, I have taken eight language learning principles and shown how they could apply to mainstream classrooms. In this way, the language awareness and responsibility of mainstream lecturers can be raised, while at the same time the language development of the students can be nurtured instead of left to the local language department to perform a quick fix for academic success. The principles are summarized in terms of their original language use and then discussed in terms of how I feel they could be applied in mainstream classes to make the material more suitable to the students in the mostly ESP classroom.

Language Issue at Peninsula Tech-nikon in South Africa

The Department of Languages and Communication at the Peninsula Technikon in Bellville, South Africa, is commonly called a "service department." The classes the department offers are considered outside the mainstream. From this precarious position, two problematic trends are being perpetuated at the Technikon: the attitude that language *is not* an issue on campus and/or that if language is an issue, the Department of Languages and Communication is on campus to correct it.

Most language instructors have probably encountered this attitude before. Language is not something that can be fixed with a ready-made product. If only it could be. Granted, some learners are more apt to learn at a faster pace, but the majority take time, need practice, and require repetition of one sort or another. Language is developmental.

To better understand why the "just fix it" attitude is not feasible in this situation, one needs to know a bit about the student population at the Technikon. In terms of language, the student population at Peninsula Technikon has changed substantially over the last six years, from predominantly native speakers of Afrikaans and English (up to 1990) to native speakers of Xhosa and Afrikaans (by 1996). According to the "Report on Student Profiles" (Peninsula Technikon 1995:3), about 80% of the first-year student population at the Technikon speaks English as a second, third, or even a fourth language. At the same time, English remains the medium of instruction for a majority (65%) of the classes in the education diploma.

To make this situation even more complex, there is no consistent Technikon-wide policy regarding language competency level. Although required language levels also vary in the U.S., depending on the course of study, there is usually a comparable scale used (e.g., TOEFL score). The students at Peninsula Technikon are admitted mostly on the basis of their high school results (matriculation). The situation differs from school to school and diploma to diploma in terms of language requirement. Some schools use only matriculation results, while others use testing.

Electrical Engineering uses the Swedish points system, which has a strong language focus. The Dental Technology diploma requires results from an HSRC (Human Science and Resource Centre) standardized language test. This test has been criticized for its heavy cultural bias, as it was written years ago when apartheid was in full swing. This is a very challenging situation indeed.

One-hundred percent of my students (24 first-year students studying a national Diploma in Commerce Education) were non-native speakers of English. These students were registered for 13 subjects per semester, each having three hours of contact time. For the Xhosa students, 92% of their classes are taught in English (the exception being their Xhosa class). For the Afrikaans-speaking students, the situation is just the reverse; they have only the communication class in English. This imbalance is due to the fact that Peninsula Technikon is a dual-medium instruction institution and content lectures are taught in Afrikaans and English. The students who speak something other than Afrikaans, English, or Xhosa, are attending all lectures in an additional language.

Clearly a quick fix would be ideal given their study load, but the approach should probably be spread throughout all of the classes with each lecturer teaching in English taking responsibility for adjusting both the language level in class and even the methodology. It is highly unrealistic to think that three hours a week of communication in English will improve the EAL students' language level sufficiently to enable him/her to cope with the other approximately 33 hours of lectures that are given in English.

Although English is an official language in South Africa, it is only one of the twelve with official status in the country. Approximately 9% of the 40 million plus people of South Africa speak English as a first or home language (Department of National Education: 1996). English, however, is, more often than not, the medium of instruction for post-secondary instruction. In general, this often means that a majority of the student population at open-admission institutions are taught through the medium of English, and for these students, English is an additional language.

For those subjects taught in English, this fact alone should have an impact on everything said in the classroom. Classes at the Technikon (economics, didactics, accounting, etc.) have, in a sense, become English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. By this I mean the majority of the learners in the classroom are studying the content in a language which they are still busy learning. The focus of the classroom is still the same; but clearly getting the message across has become more of a challenge and concern given the learner profile.

Language Learning Principles for Mainstream Classes

Hutchinson and Waters (1997:128) present eight language learning principles in relation to a learner- centered methodology. A learner-centered methodology need not exist only in a language classroom, and much language learning takes place outside of the language classroom. Hutchinson and Waters relate the learning principles to the ESP classroom, but often these EAL (English as an Additional Language) learners are in classes that are not taught by language experts, and therefore the classes are not remembered as a rich resource for language input.

The discussion on teaching techniques is not meant for language experts only. I have used the principles as a point of departure for discussions on language across the curriculum seminars. These seminars often concern department or campus-wide staff who are not well informed on language issues. Perhaps teachers are intimidated by the thought of fostering language development in the classroom because they equate the notion with grammar rules. The eight (language) learning principles are outlined below along with a discussion of their teaching implications and how they are to be applied to teaching beyond the language classroom.

1. Second language learning is a developmental process. In other words, learners use existing knowledge to make the incoming information comprehensible. Gagn, and Bridges (1988) discuss "external" and "internal" conditions of learning in much the same way. The example they use is understanding when the U.S. presidential elections take place: the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, every four years. In order to truly grasp this "external" knowledge (when the elections take place), they explain that a learner must have certain "internal" conditions in place, i.e., the knowledge of the days of the week, and the months in the year, etc. This example may seem too simple to be applicable at the tertiary level, but one can easily imagine how concepts and ideas in a field are made understandable by building on some existing knowledge.

The teaching implications of this principle are that lecturers should reconsider what, if anything, they have been taking for granted concerning their students' knowledge base. In the case of the Technikon, students come from vastly different backgrounds and experiences. The knowledge that each student brings to the classroom is likely to be just as diverse. Do the lecturers adapt the presentation to the "internal" knowledge of the student? In other words, is there ample opportunity given in class to discover what learners understand about the concept being taught? As an example, how is the idea of "perfectly competitive market" explained in an economics class filled with EAL learners? Do learners know what "competitive" means? If they have indeed heard the words, what types of understanding do they have? It is quite possible that "market" for some of the students here in South Africa simply means a fruit and vegetable stand or maybe

even what is commonly known in the U.S. as a "flea market" (a number of stalls selling various items ranging from food to crafts). The definition of perfect competition, "a large number of relatively small price-taking firms that produce a homogenous product and for whom entry and exit are relatively costless" (Dillingham et al 1992:250) means nothing for the students if they are unaware of the more basic components of the concept. The components which comprise a concept should be carefully elicited from the students and addressed if necessary.

In addition to new concepts, learners are grappling with new academic discourse. For most, studying at the tertiary level is more a great hurdle than a step from the secondary level. The discourse alone is likely another language, even for English-first language learners coming from secondary schools. The first-year student population at Peninsula Technikon has probably not been through "prep" classes, which typically familiarize the students with the conventions of studying beyond secondary school. For this reason, students should be eased into their first year study. They should be given prompts as much as possible. These could take the form of visual aids, handouts, or even words and concepts written on the board. By hearing and seeing the language, the students are better able to match the concepts and terminology to their internal knowledge, and thus be better equipped to add the external information if possible. This suggestion may sound painfully easy or remedial, but many learners, especially language learners, need to see the information as it is being discussed.

2. Language learning is an active process. The learners must actively use the new information. This is easier said than done. In terms of language learning, this means practising the vocabulary and grammar with great frequency for it to be internalized. With this principle in mind, many language classes at the tertiary level in the U.S. are time-tabled for maximum contact time (five hours a week), whereas the "content" subjects average three hours a week. The thinking behind this imbalance is related to the unlikelihood that the learner will have contact with the language outside the classroom.

What can a mainstream lecturer do with a majority of students for whom English is not their mother tongue? Students at Peninsula Technikon do have more contact with the language, but in general it is delivered at normal lecture speed, often leaving the students puzzled and unsure of the main points. The principle of frequency, however, is the same: Revise the information. According to Hamilton and Ghatala (1994:118), elaboration is the key to getting information into long-term memory. By elaboration, the authors mean working with the same information in different but related ways. Examples of elaboration techniques are: summarizing, outlining, mind-mapping, drawing pictures, using metaphors, eliciting examples for learners, etc. In ESP, the terms, concepts, and definitions are new and unfamiliar to students. According to Gagn, and Briggs (1988), repetition is the key to retention (see Footnote 1 below).

Students often struggle with the information conveyed orally, and perhaps the fact that they are struggling is partly due to the way the information is conveyed and partly due to their level of language proficiency and cognitive ability. Written material is another obstacle, but at least one can take one's time with the reading and consult a dictionary or peers to make some sense of it.

3. Language learning is a decision-making process. Typically, teachers do all the talking and making of decisions in the classroom. The teacher is the knower of the information, so it is

considered more efficient for him/her to present the material. But efficient in what way? For the lecturer, no doubt, it is easy to walk into class, deliver the information, and leave. What about the students? Hutchinson and Waters (1987:129) argue that in order to develop, learners must use existing knowledge, make decisions based on that knowledge, and see results.

This means that learners need to go through a processing step, both internally and externally: internally to formulate decisions, and externally to test those decisions. Externally, the learner would express his/her ideas and receive feedback from both the rest of the class and the instructor. In conventional teacher- controlled classrooms, the external step of students expressing knowledge does not happen until the end of the term in tests, exams, or assignments.

External processing implies a move away from summative evaluation to formative evaluation. Learners should demonstrate their knowledge often and if possible be credited for it. To wait until the end of term not only puts more pressure on the students in terms of the "all or nothing" mark, it also leaves the facilitator to estimate what percentage of the lecture material is being internalized during the term. Summative evaluation for first year students might also promote a culture of passiveness or idleness, taking advantage of the new-found freedom of tertiary study. Checking understanding frequently with mini-tasks, quizzes, or worksheets is beneficial in a number of ways: It gives the facilitator an idea of what is being internalized by the students, and it gives the students reinforcement of the material as well as motivation to attend class (accountability).

4. Language learning is not just a matter of linguistic knowledge. The premise here is that there is more to comprehension, production, and learning in general than the words themselves. A learner may be cognizant of each individual word due to a good vocabulary base, but not understand the ideas expressed in them because of a lack of cognitive development. The reverse could also be true with a student having the cognitive capacity or background to understand the concepts, but not the linguistic ability to respond successfully. As a result, language learners are often inaccurately perceived as being cognitively and conceptually slow, when in fact it might well be their linguistic ability that is lagging.

In the end, many lecturers of these typical second language learners base their judgment of students solely on their surface ability to communicate orally and in writing. If the student is poor in communication due to grammatical errors, that is often where the line is drawn and the mark given. Conversely, a lecturer is often lenient in marking because s/he understands more or less what the learner is getting at even if the message is not clearly conveyed.

5. Language learning is not the learner's first experience (with language). The students are generally competent in another language, and in terms of subject-specific information, they might have some knowledge of the concepts or terminology. A classroom should tap into these competencies and help the learners transfer them from one language (or experience) to another, or activate the existing knowledge to aid in the understanding of the new information.

Hutchinson et al. (1987:140) suggest getting the students to predict before reading or listening. Having students predict is advantageous for two reasons: It sets the students' schema (or road map) of the subject, i.e., the internal knowledge, thereby getting it ready to attach to external

knowledge, as discussed in connection with principle three above, and it informs the lecturer as to what knowledge the students already possess. A lecturer then will be able to target the session accordingly, spending time on concepts that are not clearly known, and only reviewing those that are.

In terms of teaching, schema-setting can take the form of a brief review of the day's class lesson, pre- reading, pictures, drawing, diagrams, charts, discussions, anecdotes, etc. The function of assigning readings before a lecture serves the schema-setting purpose. However, one needs to bear in mind the level of language used throughout the passage as well as the length of the passage. At the Technikon, lecturers need to monitor their schema-setting materials carefully, keeping in mind that students' backgrounds are quite different and their language abilities potentially limited.

6. Language learning is an emotional experience. This principle concerns the affective filter of the student, or variables related to motivation, attitude, anxiety, and self-confidence. The condition of these variables, according to Dulay and Burt (in Oller 1993:32), determines what information is internalised. Students can be fragile entities. They can easily be intimidated, resulting in debilitating effects. The key then is to create a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom for optimal learning. To make the learning more positive, Hutchinson and Waters (1987:129) suggest a number of ways of being sensitive to affective filters:

- Use pair work or group work to build social relationships;
- Give students time to think, and generally avoid undue pressure;
- Put less emphasis on the product (the right answer) and more on the process of getting an answer;
- Value attitude as much as aptitude and ability;
- Make "interest," "fun," and "variety" primary considerations in materials and methodology, rather than just added extras.

Fun and games should not be excluded from tertiary study. Fun and games do not preclude learning. Activities can still be fun and challenging and thereby cater to those students for whom pressure is a stimulant. Using pair and group work in the class has numerous advantages; it provides the following opportunities:

- Students get to know other students;
- Students form study groups or join with partners;
- Instructors see progress in class and "test" student knowledge and input;
- Variety is brought into the classroom;
- Pressure for individuals is reduced;
- Students work with the concepts and terminology actively rather than being passive-listeners;

In addition, using pair and group work takes some of the pressure off the instructor in terms of constant "performance," gives the students some independent learning skills practice, and at the

same time allows the instructor to observe the "intake" of learners. Following this observation, instructors can provide specific input where necessary.

7. Language learning is to a large extent incidental. One does not need to be actively studying language to learn language. In other words, at Peninsula Technikon, English (or Afrikaans) is the medium through which students learn the content, but the language itself does not need to be the focus. The content subject lecturers at the Technikon would not suddenly be required to explain grammatical rules to the class, but writing down vocabulary and terminology would be appropriate for a class with a majority of second language speakers. The focus would not be taken off the content, but the lecturer should be sensitive to the medium of instruction, should slow down the presentation, should provide visual aids, and should repeat and revise often. These are not radical measures to adapt teaching to a varied student population, but they are helpful.

8. Language learning is not systematic. Although information is stored systematically, the process by which it is assimilated is not necessarily systematic. Each learner has a preferred method of learning, and within a classroom, any combination of learning styles could be represented: visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic. Davis and Nur (1994) discuss various learning style inventories used to determine a student's preferred style of learning: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Briefly, cognitive inventories determine how a person takes in information: what problem-solving strategies are used and how they classify and sequence information. Affective inventories determine a student's motivation for learning and what factors influence this motivation. Finally, psychomotor inventories show learner preferences for subject matter and mode of presentation. The point of conducting such inventories is to discover the students' preferred learning styles and to match the teaching style to achieve optimal learning in the classroom.

Maybe not so surprising is the idea that listening passively to a lecture is not the most successful mode for learning, but it remains the most common in terms of transmission. Simply adding visuals to a lecture will benefit both the visual and auditory learners. Adding an activity that uses some type of handout will address the tactile learner. Having the students get up and change seats for group work or a jigsaw activity will give the kinesthetic learners some stimulation.

Clearly it is not possible to match all learners' needs to one instructional style. However, alternating the mode of "transmission" will provide an opportunity for all styles of learning to be modeled, give students a chance to become familiar with different strategies, and allow for a varied classroom.

Conclusion

These principles that I have outlined from Hutchinson and Waters all focus on the learner. Although the principles are from a language book, I believe they can be used easily in any subject to address learning in general and learning in a language other than one's home language. This is not to suggest that language classes at tertiary level are unnecessary. On the contrary, the "Student Profile Report" of Peninsula Technikon and the "Language Proficiency Test Report"

(1995) show that a majority of the students need overt language teaching as well as indirect language reinforcement.

The language teaching principles I have discussed and the implications I have drawn from them are meant to suggest ways in which instructors can integrate language in their classroom to reinforce anything from vocabulary to thinking and social skills in the form of group and pair work.

The approach based on the principles outlined above might be very new to both learners and instructors. Fortunately, one does not need to employ them all at once to reap the benefits. The students profiled at Peninsula Technikon could benefit from not only the language assistance discussed, but also a change in learning habits. A learner-centered approach, I feel, promotes a culture of active learning and, hopefully, leads to greater confidence and empowerment of the student.

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Footnote 1

1. I will not go into the arguments related to the admittance of students who are unable to cope with lectures, assignments, and readings. That debate is beyond the scope of this paper and I would refer you to the paper written in July of 1995 by Ian Scott of SAAAD (South African Association for Academic Development) for more information.